

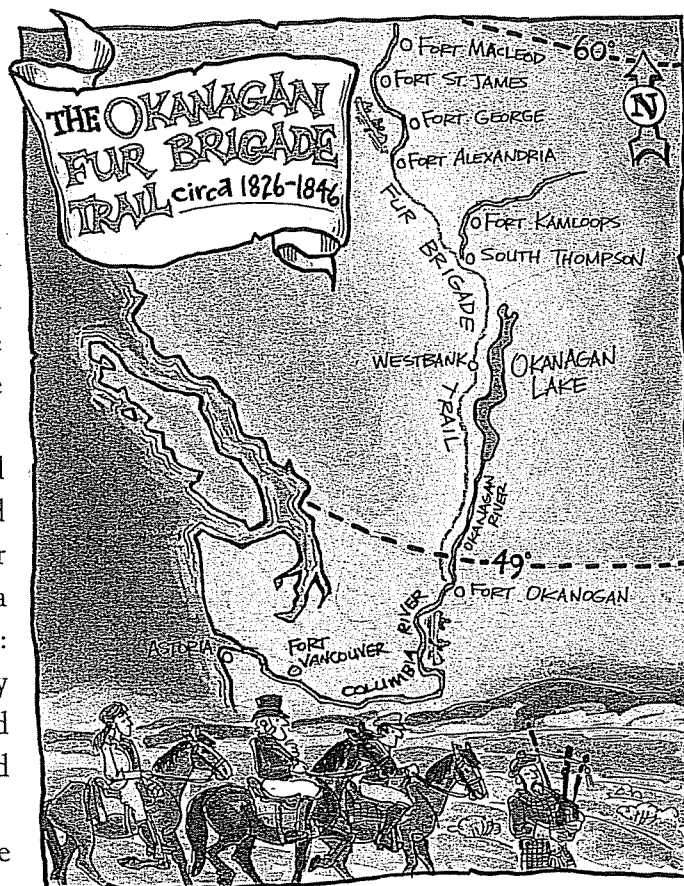
sharpen his skills, Mackenzie came back in 1792 and this time followed the Peace River to the soon-to-be-named Fraser River. Hearing its downstream waters were unnavigable, he diverted westward to a Native trading route over the Coast Mountains, where he was halted by the hostile Heiltsuk people at Bella Coola on an inlet along the Pacific Coast. He soon realized it wasn't a viable port, though he did achieve the distinction of making the first recorded crossing of the North American continent, north of Mexico.

Mackenzie and Captain George Vancouver missed each other by a mere two months, as the captain and his crew had recently arrived at the inlet as part of their survey of the west coast. Mackenzie's failure to find a Pacific port left the earlier shipping routes unchanged: the Hudson's Bay Company shipped from York Factory on Hudson Bay and the North West Company shipped from Montreal. Both routes were lengthy, arduous and fraught with enormous challenges.

The Rocky Mountains remained a formidable barrier to the Pacific Ocean and most of the early exploration of Canada's western territories was made along its north-south flowing rivers. Simon Fraser, another Nor'Wester, picked up where Mackenzie left off when he was sent to take charge of the area west of the Rockies in 1805. In spite of the aboriginal tribes in the area warning that the river was impassible and the portages worse, Fraser set off southward in 1808 along what he was sure was the Columbia River. Thirteen days later the canoes were abandoned, and Fraser and his crew proceeded on foot along the treacherous river until eventually reaching the Strait of Georgia. They were driven back inland by hostile Natives and Fraser soon realized the river that would later bear his name was not the Columbia. The journey also revealed the river's largest tributary, the Thompson River, which Fraser named after his friend and colleague, David Thompson. This new discovery provided access inland—and to the area that was soon to be known as the Okanagan Valley.

DISCOVERING A PACIFIC PORT

In the late 1700s, American businessman John Jacob Astor and his Pacific Fur Company joined with the North West Company, and together they became a formidable competitor

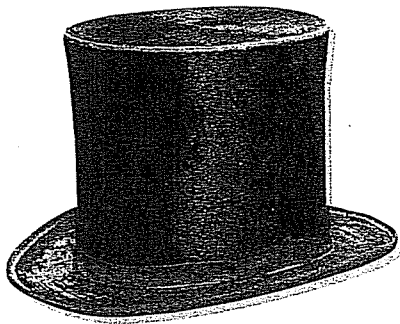


The Okanagan Fur Brigade Trail. Furs from northern Canada began their journey to the Pacific by canoe on the Fraser River. At Fort Alexandria they were transferred to pack horses for the journey south. The fur brigade continued through the Okanagan Valley to Fort Okanogan. There, the furs were transferred back into canoes and paddled down the Columbia River to Fort Vancouver, where ships were waiting to carry the furs to lucrative European markets. | NEIL THACKER

of the Hudson's Bay Company. The elusive Pacific port was everyone's priority. Scotsman David Stuart, a Nor'Wester, boarded the *Tonquin*, an American merchant ship owned by Astor, in New York harbour in September 1810, heading for the west coast of North America via the Falkland Islands and Cape Horn, off the tip of South America. The ship arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River six months later, and fought its way upstream through fifteen miles of sandbars to where the crew would build Fort Astoria (named after John Jacob Astor). Two months later, another Scot, David Thompson, also a Nor'Wester who had been charged with finding an overland route to a Pacific port, arrived at the partly constructed fort.

Later in the summer of 1811, Stuart and Thompson left Fort Astoria by canoe and travelled up the Columbia River until they reached the mouth of the Okanogan River. Stuart and his small party headed a half mile upstream, where they built Fort Okanogan, as Thompson continued along the Columbia, eventually arriving back in Montreal in 1812.

The Okanogan Valley is unique in the annals of Canadian exploration as it was discovered from the south, by Scottish explorers employed by an American. David Stuart proceeded up the Okanogan River, along the aboriginal trails skirting the Okanogan lakes, and continued northward until he reached Cumloops. He overwintered there before returning to Fort Okanogan the following year. Cumloops, soon to become Fort Kamloops, was built at the confluence of the North and South Thompson Rivers. It was David Stuart's journey north from Fort Astoria that finally revealed the elusive connection between Canada's north and the Pacific Ocean. The route was soon to become a vital link in the lucrative North American fur trade.



The North American fur trade was driven by European fashion and the desire for beaver-felt hats and exotic furs. Beavers were close to extinction in Europe and the New World became another source for pelts—as well as new colonies and untapped riches. |

HAT: KELOWNA MUSEUMS COLLECTION CA 969-020-001. PHOTO: SHARRON SIMPSON COLLECTION

FOR THE SAKE OF A HAT: THE OKANAGAN FUR BRIGADE TRAIL

It took a few years to sort out whether the Okanogan Valley really did provide a better route for getting northern furs to market and vital supplies to the remote forts. Some years the fur brigades travelled through the Okanogan Valley to Fort Astoria, while in other years the furs were shipped overland and took months to reach the eastern ports. Competition was fierce, and in 1821 the Hudson's Bay Company absorbed the North West Company, and the governor of the combined company, Sir George Simpson, came west to look over the company's shipping options. The logic of the southern route quickly became apparent, and from 1826 until 1847 fur brigades regularly travelled the Okanogan Trail.



Westbank Fur Brigade Cairn

The first brigade cairn was unveiled in Westbank in 1949. It read: "Okanagan Brigade Trail—A link in the fur-trading route from New Caledonia (North Central British Columbia) to the Columbia River. First explored by the Astorians in 1811, the trail was used by the North West Company and from 1821 by the Hudson's Bay Company. The fur brigades from New Caledonia journeyed overland by this route from Kamloops to Fort Okanagan until 1848. The gold seekers of 1858 coming through the Okanagan Valley followed the old trail, which also in the early 1860's became a second road to Cariboo."

The original cairn and plaque were subsequently replaced with inscriptions in English, French and Sylix. The English inscription reads: "This historic trail was developed from a network of travel and trade routes used by Aboriginal people for centuries. David Stuart of the Pacific Fur Company explored the trail from Fort Okanagan to Kamloops in 1811, and it was used in turn by fur brigades of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. Until the mid-century, fur traders passed by here to exchange goods for furs with the Okanagan and Shuswap Nations and others further north. Surviving sections of the trail along Lake Okanagan are a testimony to these former trading partnerships and the rich heritage of the region." | SHARRON SIMPSON COLLECTION

Furs were collected from the various forts on the northern tributaries of the Fraser River and transported by canoe to Fort Alexandria, near present-day Quesnel. Since the Fraser was not navigable south of the fort, the furs were transferred to pack horses and successive brigades of two or three hundred horses headed south. Fresh pack horses were picked up halfway along the route at Fort Kamloops, and the brigades continued on through the Okanagan Valley and along the Okanagan River to Fort Okanogan. Once they arrived, the furs were again loaded into canoes for their journey to Fort Vancouver (near present-day Vancouver, Washington), the new outpost established by Simpson in 1824 a few miles upriver from Fort Astoria, on the Columbia's more accessible northern bank. There they would be loaded on ships bound for Europe. The distance from Fort Vancouver to Fort St. James, the brigades' northern terminus, was approximately 1,200 miles and the journey would take about two months to complete. The brigades would usually spend a month in Fort Okanogan collecting supplies and trade goods before returning north.

Bagpipes reverberated across the hillsides as the brigade travelled the length of the Okanagan Valley. It must have been quite a sight: a long line of pack horses and their handlers, led by the distinguished-looking chief factor, or head trader, in his high beaver hat, a stiff white collar that reached to his ears and a finely tailored black jacket. Ceremony was essential and bagpipes set the stage for the gunfire salutes that marked entering and departing from forts or campsites. The day's routine rarely varied: the campfires were lit at the first morning light and breakfast, usually dried salmon, was prepared for all. The scouts departed first to find the next night's campsite, while the brigade horses were rounded up and each reloaded with two eighty-four-pound packs of furs and camp supplies. The brigade broke camp about nine a.m. and by four that afternoon, having travelled about twenty miles, they would arrive at the new campsite. The factor's tent was always the first to be erected, set apart from the others, and his fire was the first to be lit.

The agreement signed between Britain and the United States in 1846 establishing the forty-ninth parallel as the international boundary restricted the brigade's access to Fort Vancouver, and brought an end to the Okanagan Fur Brigade Trail. Governor Simpson had foreseen the possibility of Fort Vancouver being lost to the British and had already established Fort Langley, on the south side of the Fraser River, as an alternative port. The Hudson's Bay Company and the fur trade remained part of the west for another twenty-five years, although the demand

for pelts decreased as fashionable Europeans lost interest in fur, and aboriginal communities became less nomadic as they turned to farming and raising cattle.

Today, a map showing remnants of the Okanagan Brigade Trail is available to the curious who want to search it out along Westside Road, across Okanagan Lake from Kelowna. Part of the trail is on private land—some has been built on or planted—while other sections have vanished. Occasionally a marker will appear on a tree, identifying the “H.B.C. Fur Brigade Trail.” In West Kelowna, at the intersection of Highway 97 and Old Okanagan Highway, a cairn marks the high point of land where the local indigenous peoples and the brigade traders carried on their business. Otherwise, there is little evidence of the Okanagan’s short-lived involvement in Canada’s fur industry.

GOD FOLLOWED

By the time the last of the fur brigades passed through the Okanagan in 1847, Protestant missionaries were already well established in the Oregon territories. The Catholic Church needed a presence in the new land but was so short of priests that it had to appeal to France for assistance. Twenty-four-year-old Charles John Felix Adolph Pandosy



Father Pandosy's first building was a log chapel with living quarters above. The larger building beside it was a root cellar with walls of parallel logs built four inches apart and packed with earth to insulate the fruits and vegetables stored for the winter. | KELOWNA PUBLIC ARCHIVES 7075